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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000090

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NSC FOR TSHANNON AND CBARTON
HQ USSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/04/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: ARCHBISHOP URGES MORE USG CRITICISM OF CHAVEZ

Classified By: Mark Wells, Acting Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b).

Summary

11. (C) Venezuelan Archbishop Baltazar Porras, head of the council of Catholic bishops of Venezuela, told Ambassador January 6 the USG ought to be more outspoken in its criticism of Hugo Chavez. Porras urged more international community involvement to contain Chavez's regional aspirations, though he admitted that political will to do so is minimal. He asserted that Chavez will continue to dismantle democratic civil society such as organized labor, the business sector, and the church. The Archbishop lamented the GOV's subtle campaign to sideline the church from its traditional work in poor neighborhoods, the educational system, and the military. End Summary.

Senior Church Leader Urges Engagement, Containment

12. (C) At the invitation of the Papal Nuncio, the Ambassador attended a lunch on January 6 with Baltazar Porras, Archbishop of Merida and head of the Venezuela Council of Bishops (CEV). Porras, one of President Hugo Chavez's strongest public critics, told the Ambassador that there is widespread perception among the opposition that the USG softened its message against Chavez after the August 2004 referendum because of energy interests. Porras suggested that the USG be more clear and public in its criticism of the Chavez administration.

13. (C) Porras said the international community also needs to work and speak out more to contain Chavez and the export of his revolution. Porras said most regional governments have deferred to Brazilian President Ignacio "Lula" da Silva to handle Chavez because the two share leftist ideologies. Lula has been unwilling to engage, however, which has stymied regional efforts to contain Chavez, the Archbishop asserted. Porras said the Europeans have been just as weak on Chavez, especially since the departure of Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar. The Archbishop said that both Latin America and Europe need strong leadership from the USG.

Fighting Chavez Long Term

14. (C) Porras described Chavez as a "long-term problem." He said Chavez will continue to dismantle civil society groups necessary to foster democratic rule: organized labor, the independent press, the business community, and the church. The Archbishop cited as an example the GOV efforts to penetrate the Catholic school system in Merida. GOV officials insisted that the Catholics accept "community representatives" on their school boards, and once accepted these individuals began to push revolutionary "reforms." Porras also noted reduced contacts with the military, which had traditionally invited him to change of command ceremonies but had not done so in more than three years.

15. (C) Porras offered to facilitate any USG efforts at the community level to demonstrate that non-GOV entities -- the church, the private sector, etc. -- can have a positive impact on Venezuela's poor. He welcomed USG visits to church social programs in poor neighborhoods. Porras warned that the longer the USG waits, the more successful GOV will be at undermining traditional democratic organizations. He acknowledged an inherent conflict in his own analysis: Chavez is a long-term problem but the longer it takes to address, the stronger he becomes.

Comment

16. (C) Porras and the rest of the Catholic leadership have kept low profiles since the referendum, the results of which they grudgingly accepted. Chavez has targeted the church, especially its leadership, which he sees as an ally of the

previous political regime. Chavez has a long-running conflict as well with Porras, who was among the first to accuse Chavez of authoritarian tendencies. Rivalries aside, Porras is in touch with current domestic and international thought on Venezuela. The Catholic social projects Porras seeks to promote, while not on the scale of the GOV's "missions," do have a history of solidarity with Venezuela's poor that is not so easily undone, despite Chavez's efforts.

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